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## The Life of William Prest, York Entomologist (1824-1884)

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William Prest was one of the most influential Nineteenth Century entomologists from the York area. He was a skilled and energetic collector of Lepidoptera and an enthusiastic communicator and compiler of natural history information. At different times in his life he organized two local natural history societies from his own home: the York Entomological Society (YES) and the York and District Field Naturalists' Society (YDFNS), the latter lasting over a hundred years. He represented the York district within the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union (YNU), proposed its current name and was first president of its Entomological Section. He obtained many new county records of Lepidoptera and was involved in the discovery of new varieties. He collaborated with George Porritt in compiling the first list of Yorkshire Lepidoptera. Evidence suggests that he was very literate, artistic, generous, gregarious, a fast learner, a talented organizer and a much-liked and admired man. Remarkably, for all this, there has been little attempt to compile the existing information about his life. Below I report what I have been able to glean from a short time researching William Prest and his work. I hope it may serve to stimulate others to solve some of the remaining mysteries about this remarkable man. I have attempted to interpret around known facts, so that it is more than just a dry list of dates. To indicate what is factual, I have referenced sources fully. I use current vernacular names of most of the species mentioned below, as the scientific names have mostly changed since Prest's day and, where scientific names are used, they are the modern ones.

### **Birth to marriage, 1824-1852**

William grew up in an ever-increasing family in York city centre with all the boys, like their father, becoming skilled manual tradesmen. William became an apprentice painter and decorator and eventually “graduated” as a freeman of the city, setting up his own decorating business and marrying the daughter of his landlady.

William Prest was born on 7 May 1824<sup>1</sup> and baptized two days later<sup>1</sup> at St Sampson’s Anglican church, next to Newgate market. His father, William senior, probably born c. 1803 in Warrington<sup>2</sup>, was a tinner<sup>1</sup> and later a gas fitter<sup>2</sup>, and had come from very lowly beginnings<sup>3</sup> but achieved freemanship of York through servitude in 1820<sup>4</sup>, which allowed him to escape the deep poverty of his youth. In 1818, at the extremely young (but then legal) age of c. 15, he married Mary Bullock (b. Lincoln, c. 1805<sup>2</sup>) at St Sampson’s<sup>5</sup>. At the time of William’s birth the couple were living in Jubbergate<sup>1</sup> but before that lived in nearby Silver Street<sup>6</sup>.

Sadly, but not unusually for this time, William senior and Mary’s first two children died young: Jane in 1822 aged 3<sup>7</sup> and Thomas in 1824 aged 2<sup>8</sup>. William, the third to be born, was the first of a large ever-growing family to survive childhood; next came George (b. 1826<sup>9</sup>, later a whitesmith<sup>10</sup>), then Robert (b. c.1830<sup>11</sup>, later an engineer<sup>12</sup>), Ellen (b. 1834<sup>13</sup>), Elizabeth (b. 1836<sup>14</sup>), Thomas (b. 1842<sup>15</sup>, later a gas-fitter<sup>16</sup>) and James (b. 1845 later a stonemason<sup>17</sup>). The Prest family moved residence frequently, no doubt as their needs and resources changed, though they remained in York city centre<sup>2, 9, 11, 13, 14</sup>.

William Prest (William junior) became a painter and decorator, thus following his father, as did his brothers, as a skilled manual tradesman. We do not know much about the circumstances of this choice but he expressed a talent and proclivity for art throughout his later life that was likely an important factor. Aged 17 he was apprentice to painter Ferdinando Brown in Davygate, along with three other apprentices<sup>18</sup>. In 1847, aged 23, he achieved freemanship of the city by birthright<sup>19</sup> and, by 27, he had his own business employing a man and two boys and was lodging at 2 Tower Place, the house of widow Jane Seagar<sup>20</sup>. Jane was an upholstress<sup>20</sup>, whose husband Thomas, a glass blower<sup>21</sup>, had died in 1844 of dropsy (oedema)<sup>22</sup>. She lived with her daughter Phoebe Anne<sup>20</sup>. One thing must have led to another, for on 26 June 1852, William married Phoebe at St Mary’s, Castlegate<sup>21</sup>. He was 28 and she 21.

An alliance between the Seagars and Prest would have been mutually beneficial. Jane and Phoebe had lost the financial support of the late Thomas but lived in a comfortable riverside property. Prest’s business could provide for both women as well as any offspring, whilst he could profit from Jane’s support with home and later their family. In the initial years Prest is likely to have received some financial assistance from his future mother-in-law. Starting out as a lodger, Prest became very integrated within the Seagar family, which remained a close one until his death. The Prest family grave, adjacent to the Seagar plot, had been paid for by Jane in 1849<sup>23</sup>, three years before William and Phoebe married, and since the marriage took place when Phoebe was 21, it seems probable that marriage was delayed until she had come of age.

### **Children, work and the York Entomological Society, 1853 -1873**

Between 1853 and 1873 William and Phoebe raised three daughters and two sons, although one of their daughters did not survive childhood. They moved house at least three times. William developed his painting and decorating business. He also developed an interest in entomology, starting a collection of Lepidoptera, which rapidly grew. He published several articles about his collecting excursions around the York district. He became an active member of the YES, whose

meetings he hosted for some years at his home, but which eventually folded in the late 1860s.

After marrying, William and Phoebe moved to 16 Coppergate<sup>24</sup> where they had their first child, Mary Jane, born on 19 April 1853<sup>25</sup>, baptized at All Saint's Pavement on 11 May<sup>25</sup>. William worked out of several premises at Church Lane, High Ousegate and Coppergate<sup>26</sup>, and had on show "a choice assortment of chimney glasses, window cornices, brackets, pictures, picture frames". He would also clean, frame and restore pictures<sup>26</sup>, all in addition to the standard painting and wallpapering services we nowadays associate with the profession. A second daughter, Laura Ann, was born in 1855<sup>27</sup> and baptized at St Mary's Castlegate<sup>28</sup>. By then the family had moved around the corner into Castlegate itself<sup>28</sup>.

William's interest in entomology appears to have begun during these young family years. Just after the birth of his first son, Charles Seagar Prest<sup>29</sup>, he first appeared in an entomological journal in October 1857, age 33, with a mention in the monthly meeting report of the YES (Anderson, 1857a), then newly formed (Anderson, 1857b), at which he exhibited some Red Admiral butterfly specimens. The YES held "show and tell" meetings, promoted exchange of specimens and information and ran a lending library for members (see Anderson, 1857b). Prest appears to have been amongst the original members but was obviously then inexperienced and he was probably encouraged to join by a more experienced acquaintance. The day after this first entomological mention, baby Charles was baptized at St Mary Castlegate<sup>30</sup>.

Two weeks later William was again in print, offering specimens for exchange (Prest, 1857): Brimstone, Marbled White, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Marsh Fritillary, Grizzled Skipper and Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet in return for Wood White, Mountain Ringlet, Large Heath, White Admiral, Painted Lady, Heath Fritillary, Duke of Burgundy, Holly Blue, Small Blue, Chalkhill Blue, Northern Brown Argus, Chequered Skipper and Lulworth Skipper. This list is revealing of what was and was not available to a York entomologist of the day and thought valuable. The idea of York district populations of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Marsh Fritillary and Grizzled Skipper would seem fantastic today were it not for other contemporary records of their presence (see Frost, 2005). Yet it is strange that he had no Holly Blue or Painted Lady, both known from the York area at the time (Morris, 1853). The species listed are all butterflies and not moths, which dominated his later findings, as is common amongst 'newbie' lepidopterists today. In addition, he requested that "applicants had better send boxes as I am only a young collector and have not got many yet." The return address given is 7 Castlegate, an address that was about to become well known to York entomologists.

There was at that time a serious split within the YES. Early meetings had taken place at The Bay Horse Inn, 25 Gillygate, the premises of then YES Treasurer, Robert Hind. For the 20 March 1858 edition of the *Entomologist's Weekly Intelligencer*, the editor Henry Tibbats Stainton received reports of not one but two March meetings of the YES occurring at different addresses on the same day (Anderson, 1858; Anon., 1858)! One took place at The Bay Horse as usual, attended by Hind and just two other members, one of whom was new, whilst the other meeting with all the other members took place at 7 Castlegate (Figure 1, p136) with Prest in the chair! To Stainton, this was too good an opportunity for Shakespearian humour to pass up, and the editorial page (Stainton, 1858) remarks that:

"York is a large place, a fine place, and a very worthy place and lo! 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by the sun of York!' But surely the two

*friendly* societies should not both monopolise the same title; ‘Methinks there are two Richmonds in the field’, but the question of course arises which is which?.....Perhaps next month they will both be claiming the title of *original*.”

This prediction came true when the 11 Sept 1858 *York Herald* reported a meeting of the Castlegate society under the moniker “the original society”<sup>31</sup>, countered a week later by “A. Member” of the Gillygate society<sup>32</sup>. The *York Herald* editors commented cheekily that “we are unable to give any opinion on the merits of the case. Readers can sift the matter for themselves, *if they think it worthwhile* [their emphasis].”<sup>32</sup>

Publications give no direct indication of the cause of this split but it may not have been desirable for some members to meet in a Public House; an editorial comment underneath Anderson (1857b) implies this, and the Temperance movement was in those days gaining momentum. Naturally, a move to other premises would not be advantageous to the publican Mr Hind. Whatever the cause of this schism, two York societies using the same name existed until at least 1860<sup>33,34</sup> and, for several years, meetings of both societies were reported in the *York Herald*, though only the Castlegate society reported thereafter in the *Weekly Intelligencer*. Ultimately the Castlegate society was more active and lasted until at least 1866<sup>35</sup>. Thus it was that Prest took centre-stage in York entomology for the rest of his life.

The summer of 1858 was a hot one. Something more of the paradise the Vale of York presented to lepidopterists at this time can be gleaned from Prest’s report of July 5<sup>th</sup> (Prest, 1858a), of captures at ‘Longwith’ (presumably Langwith), Stockton [Forest], Holtby and Buttercrambe. These included Marsh Fritillary, Painted Lady (1), Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (both common), Dark Green Fritillary (abundant), Ringlet, Grizzled, Dingy, Small and Large Skippers and Silver-studded Blue. Dark Green Fritillary “was so abundant on the 29<sup>th</sup> [June] that I took upwards of a hundred in about three hours”. In the Sept 4 edition of the *Weekly Intelligencer*, Prest reports Alder Moth, Grayling, Large Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Comma, Silver-washed, Dark Green and High Brown Fritillaries, Buff Footman, Small Wainscot, Purple Hairstreak, Blackneck, Dark Bordered Beauty, an Ear moth, Straw Underwing and Broad-bordered Yellow Underwing (Prest, 1858b). He had now graduated onto moths as well as butterflies! Later in September a Camberwell Beauty was captured in York and it “came into his possession” (Prest, 1858c)!

On 3 January 1859 the annual meeting of the YES took place at Prest’s house and Rev F.O. Morris, editor of *The Naturalist* (not then a publication of the YNU, which did not yet exist), was elected president with Prest as a vice-president (Anderson, 1859). Morris was an established, well-connected and highly regarded entomologist living then at Nunburnholme near Market Weighton. He had published his *History of British Butterflies* in 1853, naming many fine collecting sites around York including Langwith (between Heslington and Wheldrake), Heslington Fields (now the University of York Heslington East campus), Stockton Common, Allerthorpe, Buttercrambe Moor and Sutton-on-Derwent (Morris, 1853). These sites contained a swathe of unimproved, often heathy, habitats in an arc north-east to south-east of York which were also visited by Prest. At the same meeting Prest exhibited his “fine collection of British Butterflies” which, with the help of specimen exchange, had not taken long to assemble! From then on his focus became moths!

In July 1859 both Prest and Robert Anderson (secretary of YES) were offering in exchange Dark Bordered Beauty moth, then as now a national rarity for which York was famous, Prest having

Figure 1. Seven Castlegate, York, the Prest family home from 1855 until at least 1866 and location of York Entomological Society meetings (see p134).

Photo taken in 2019 by P.J. Mayhew.



“again taken this species in some numbers” (Prest, 1859a). On 9 August, Prest’s oldest child Mary Jane, then six-years old, when walking by the New Walk along the River Ouse, found an Alder Moth larva and brought it home to him (Prest, 1859b). It is a charming sign of the empathy between daughter and father, and one of the few insights we have about family involvement in his pursuits. At the 2 Jan meeting in 1860, 523 Lepidoptera species had been found by the members the previous year, of which 12 were new. Prest was no longer amongst the society officers and the meetings were now to be rotated at other members’ houses (Anderson, 1860). In April 1861, however, the society met once again at Castlegate for a dinner to celebrate the third anniversary of the first ‘Castlegate’ meeting<sup>36</sup>. About twenty guests were present, including several prominent citizens with natural history interests. One of these was a Mr Hind; could this have been Robert Hind? If so, maybe this was an attempt to settle any animosity between those involved in the YES split. Other evidence below suggests that the matter was eventually settled amicably. The occasion was replete with speeches and toasts and an open invitation from Morris for a guided entomological ramble at Nunburnholme. This was all testament to the success of Prest’s initial leadership.

Annie Prest, William and Phoebe’s third daughter, was baptized on 22 April 1860 at St Mary Castlegate<sup>37</sup>. In 1861 the family was still living in Castlegate with Jane still listed as an upholsterer, Mary Jane and Laura both at school and William now employing two men and a boy<sup>38</sup>. William and Phoebe’s second son, and last child, William Thomas, was baptized at St Mary Castlegate on 29 July 1862<sup>39</sup>.

Prest does not appear in YES meeting reports after December 1862 and the reports give the impression of less activity by the society in general, which was probably the cause of its eventual demise. No doubt this was a busy time for Prest, with a business to run and young family to support. There was also a hiatus in accessible entomological journals at this time with the folding of the *Weekly Intelligencer* in 1861, which may have led to a waning in entomological interest. Prest did however continue with entomology: on 19 August 1866 (Prest, 1866) he took a Fortified Carpet from Stockton Forest (see Allis, 1870; c.f. Prest, 1866), not Holgate as has been reported by Sutton & Beaumont (1989), beaten from broom and checked by Thomas H. Allis, another York entomologist of national repute. This remains one of only two records of this moth in mainland Britain and was often considered Prest’s finest capture (Porritt, 1884a). Prest allowed the editors of the *Entomologist’s Monthly Magazine* to confirm the identification by sending a coloured drawing. On 2 October 1868 a Silver-striped Hawk-moth was captured



on Heworth Moor and found its way into Prest's collection (Prest, 1868).

In April 1871 Prest wrote a page-long summary of captures near York the previous year and it provides some of the best insights into his collecting trips (Prest, 1871). Prest collected a lot with John T. Carrington (a former YES member) in that year, using sugar, and also reared larvae at home. Captures included a long list from "our bog" (Askham, one of Prest's earliest yet cryptic references to it), including Oblique Carpet, Dentated Pug and Brown Scallop. He details an unsuccessful trip to Bishop Wood near Cawood to find Great Oak Beauty, and then a visit with Carrington and Edwin Birchall and son to what was evidently Sandburn, near Stockton Forest, to find Dark Bordered Beauty. They took Plain Wave at sugared trees there on the evening of 16 July. "Next morning we rose early and proceeded to run the blockade, for, be it known, that the proprietor of the estate had offered five shillings reward for apprehension of any entomologist found thereon!" This implied an overnight stay, probably at the Windmill Inn (now the Four Alls) on the Malton Road. "Soon after 7a.m., *vespertina* [Dark Bordered Beauty] made its appearance, and by breakfast time each of us had a fine series". The fact that Askham and Sandburn are not specifically named in the article may indicate a desire to protect these sites from other collectors.

1872 was a Camberwell Beauty influx year and the pages of the *Entomologist's Monthly Magazine* were full of reports of them. Prest contributed several reports from across Yorkshire (Prest, 1873). We can thus see him becoming a trusted collator of other lepidopterists' findings from across the county.

Throughout these years work and family life continued. For the Huntington Church Bazaar in April 1867 "the guildhall had received most tasteful decorations by the aid of flags, banners and various appropriate devices, under the superintendence of Mr William Prest, decorator, of Castlegate"<sup>40</sup>. However, on 23 December 1869 tragedy struck the family with the death of young Annie, aged 9, from "phthisis" (tuberculosis)<sup>41</sup>. The mood in the family that Christmas must have been a sombre one. She was buried in York Cemetery (in the Seagar family grave, grave 4103, presumably because her parents had not yet died) on 28 December<sup>41</sup>. By 1871, Jane had apparently retired from upholstery, Mary Jane had started work as a saleswoman (she maintained an apparently good business head much later) and both the boys were at school.



Figure 2. Thirteen Holgate Road, York, the Prest family home from 1873 to 1884 and location of York and District Field Naturalists' Society meetings. Photo taken in 2019 by P.J. Mayhew.

The family had moved to 3 St Saviourgate<sup>42</sup>. By January 1873 (Prest, 1873) the family had moved again to 13 Holgate Road (Figure 2), another of the Prest addresses that was shortly to become part of local entomological history.

### Establishing the YDFNS and the YNU, 1874 -1877

Between 1874 and 1877 William set up the York and District Field Naturalists' Society and ran it from his own home. Meeting reports were published in *The Naturalist (New Series)* by the West Riding Consolidated Naturalists' Society (WRCNS) to which the YDFNS was affiliated. As well as field excursions in the York District, William collected in many parts of mainland Britain during this period. At the first council meeting of the WRCNS he suggested the name change to the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union, which was adopted, and he was elected president of its Entomological Section.

On 5 March 1874 the *York Herald* published a notice under the title of "York and District Field Naturalists' Society"<sup>43</sup>. The text continued: "Under this title a new society for scientific research has just been inaugurated in this city". The object of the new society was "to enable its members to thoroughly study the various branches of natural history". Monthly excursions were to be organized, and meetings for essays, discussion and the exhibition of specimens were to be held once a month at Prest's house. Remarkably, the minute books of these early meetings still survive, written in Prest's own hand<sup>44</sup>. There is a beautiful illuminated title page signed by Prest, illustrating his artistic ability (Figure 3, p140).

On 11 March Prest was elected Secretary and Edwin Birchall, a former YES member and an entomologist of national repute, President<sup>44</sup>. The YDFNS organized excursions in its first years to Jackdaw Crag (Boston Spa), Bishop Wood (Cawood) and Gormire (Sutton Bank)<sup>44</sup>. In addition to insects (mainly Lepidoptera), YDFNS meetings featured a range of natural history specimens such as stuffed birds (shot), birds' eggs, fish, minerals, fossils and plants, along with curiosities and antiquities. In the first few meetings eclectic specimens included: "a fine specimen of the Amazon parrot that had lately died at the age of 100 years" (Anon., 1876a); "a specimen of the Black Swan which had lately adorned our noble river but was unfortunately killed during the late floods" (Anon., 1876b); "a fine specimen of the Common Sandpiper, taken from a large Pike, which had evidently bolted the bird alive" (Prest, 1876a) and "a very beautiful case of white kittens" (Prest, 1876b). Family were involved in meetings both directly and indirectly. For example, at the January 1875 meeting "after the members had partaken of refreshment, provided by Mrs Prest, the chairman proposed a vote of thanks to that lady and Mr Prest for their hospitality."<sup>45</sup> Charles Prest contributed birds' eggs as exhibits (Anon., 1877a), and the jawbone of the Indian shark and the saw of a large sawfish, brought by him from the Indian coast (he was a marine engineer) (Prest, 1883a). Charles is also mentioned in the YNU list of officers from 1877 as YDFNS librarian<sup>46</sup>; presumably, the library was housed at 13 Holgate Road.

On 13 July 1874 Prest went collecting at Sandburn near Stockton-on-the-Forest and found a male variety of Dark Bordered Beauty with a rich brown colour and without prominent chequerboard markings (Figure 4a, p141). This was later figured in *The Entomologist* (Anon., 1878a) and formally described as *ab. fulva* by Cockayne (1934). Cockayne (1942) supposed that a specimen originating from Prest's collection that came into his possession via Webb and Harwood was this one. It is now in the Natural History Museum in London (specimen BMNH(E) 1857343). He also considered this to be the specimen figured by Barrett (1901, fig. 298c). Evidently, however, Prest collected more than one such specimen; for example in the YDFNS minutes of April 8 1874, before the above specimen was allegedly collected, he says he displayed a "fine variety" of this species<sup>44</sup>, which was likely also an *ab. fulva*.

Prest also went further afield for his collecting; for example, he mentions in the YDFNS minutes visits to Monks Wood and St Ives (the Fens), Sherwood Forest, Witherslack (Cumbria) and



Darenth Wood near Dartford, Kent<sup>44, 47</sup>. He displayed specimens at YDFNS meetings from a wider variety of sites, but it is generally unclear which were visited by him and from which the specimens were just acquired by exchange. In a later article (Prest, 1879a) he claims to have “visited most of the celebrated hunting grounds”, suggesting that most were collected by him on expeditions. Such sites include Llangollen, Wallasey (Prest, 1876c), Scotland (Anon. 1878b), the New Forest (Anon., 1877b) and Lewes (Anon., 1880a). Quite how he mixed running his own business with family life and his entomological hobby is left to the imagination, but entomologists of the day were often prodigious workers; he had his employees and sons to draw on for business help and, of course, there was no shortage of hands at home for domestic work!

Further confirmation of William’s artistic talent comes from the 1875 YDFNS annual meeting when he exhibited some “fine drawings of British moths, illustrating the pseudo-bombyces [notodontids and allies]”<sup>48</sup>. Papers read by Prest at YDFNS meetings included “The life history and economy of *Eupithecia albipunctata*” (White-spotted Pug) (Anon., 1875) and “A week’s collecting in Sherwood Forest” (Prest, 1879b), though they were apparently not published or kept.

Following his success at organizing a celebratory birthday dinner for the YES, the first annual dinner of the YDFNS was held at the Queen Hotel, Micklegate<sup>49</sup> (just a short walk from Holgate Road) on Saturday 9 February 1877. Amongst some 60 guests there were several local dignitaries including the Lord Mayor and Sherriff. Prest gave an after-dinner speech about the society, “remarking that it was formed about three years ago to study the various branches of natural history in a practical manner.” For several years there had been no York society to meet this need but several were now flourishing in the West Riding, including the West Riding Consolidated Naturalists’ Society (WRCNS). It had been intended to be inclusive of working men and especially to encourage young men, but was open to all classes. The society had been successful and numbered nearly fifty members. Similar annual dinners took place for the next several years in different venues around York.

From 1875, under the auspices of the WRCNS, *The Naturalist (New Series)* journal had been published and Prest had been sending in regular reports of the YDFNS meetings. At the first meeting of the WRCNS council on 2 December 1876, Prest was present as a York representative (Anon., 1877c). One of the resolutions was that subsequent meetings should be divided into Sections, an arrangement that still exists, with George Porritt and Prest nominated to initially organize the Entomological Section. At this meeting Prest also proposed changing the name of the WRCNS to ‘The Yorkshire Naturalists’ Union’, in order to encompass areas of Yorkshire thus far excluded. The motivation may well have included the fact, still awkward today, that due to its central geography in Yorkshire, York naturalists encroach across several administrative boundaries. Prest’s suggestion was viewed favourably and, after some discussion of alternative wordings, adopted<sup>50</sup>. Thus, Prest’s suggestion provided Yorkshire for the first time with a unified county natural history forum.

#### **Major entomological works: 1877-1884**

From 1877 until his death in 1884, Prest published important papers about the Yorkshire Lepidoptera fauna, presented specimens at major national and county exhibitions, organized field excursions and meetings for the YNU and had to deal with a financial crisis in the YDFNS which resulted in its eventual merger with another local society and the loss of Prest’s influence and leadership. Prest died shortly after this.

the 2 April 1877 meeting the newly renamed YNU formally approved its new name and also approved Prest as president and Porritt as secretary of the Entomological Section (Denison Roebuck, 1877a); a fairly impressive pairing! Prest became a regular attendee and organizer at YNU excursions and meetings in the next few years. At the May meeting Prest and George Dennis (another YDFNS member) exhibited an enormous sheet web (10x5ft) of the Cacao Moth *Ephesia elutella* found in a chicory warehouse, although by some confusion this was originally reported as *Eupithecia albipunctata* from a chocolate store (Denison Roebuck, 1877b)! In April 1877 another moth variety “discovered” by Prest was described formally: the melanic form of White-spotted Pug *E. albipunctata* var. *angelicata* (Barrett, 1877) (Figure 4, p141).

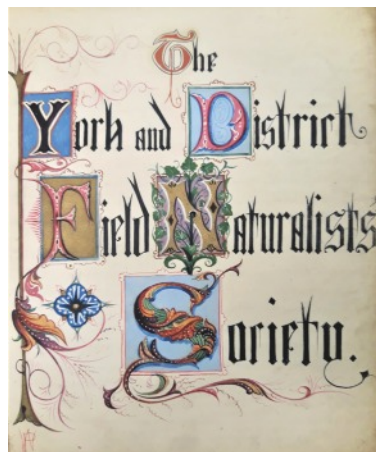


Figure 3 (see p138).

First page of the Minute Book of the York and District Field Naturalist Society, drawn by Prest. Reproduced from an original in the Borthwick Institute, University of York, (YDFNS/2/1).

Specimens from Bishop Wood had been exhibited by Prest at a YDFNS meeting the previous year (Anon., 1876c) and thence sent to Barrett, with the name suggested by Prest because they had been reared from larvae feeding on Angelica. April, however, brought grief to the family in the death of Jane Seagar, Phoebe’s mother, who had supported William and Phoebe ever since they had met. She died of bronchitis on 11 April aged 81 and was buried in the family grave in York Cemetery on 16 April<sup>51</sup>.

Prest also published a list of Yorkshire micro-lepidoptera found in 1877 in *The Transactions* (Prest, 1878) to complement one by Porritt on macros (Porritt, 1878a). In Porritt’s report, 1877 is reported as the wettest year in Yorkshire on record and being dismal for Lepidoptera. Prest was credited with finding a Grey Mountain Carpet in York which, being out of the way, was perhaps explained by the dismal conditions! Prest’s report is full of apologies of his own ignorance with micros and the fact that it was based on records from just himself and few York members. It contains a detailed description of the *Ephesia* finding noted above but otherwise is notable for the list of sites frequently visited, namely Thorne, Sandburn, Bramham, Bishop Wood, Askham, Strensall and Stockton Forest. Many of these remain some of our premier Yorkshire sites today, though all are probably degraded relative to Prest’s time.

At this time the subject of melanism in Lepidoptera was topical and Prest published an opinion paper on this topic in *The Entomologist* (Prest, 1877). He detailed how frequently he encountered dark varieties of Lepidoptera at York, where he claimed there was relatively little coal smoke, and gave a list of species from which he had captured dark varieties, including Coronet, Light Knot Grass, Knot Grass, The Miller, Dark Green Fritillary, Dark Bordered Beauty (four dark specimens in twenty years all captured within 50 yards of the same place having bred “hundreds, nay I may

say thousands" of the ordinary type), White-spotted Pug, Dark Arches, White Ermine, Magpie, Water Carpet, Centre-barred Sallow, Peppered Moth (both black and intermediate forms bred, but only exceptionally), Northern Drab and Minor Shoulder-Knot. Because of the local nature of varieties he was seeing, in the absence of coal smoke, Prest suggested that the nature of the soil and its effects on the foodplant were probably more important than fumes of coal smoke in generating such varieties. This implies that he was thinking more about environmental effects on development than processes affecting the frequency of hereditary forms, such as selection and migration, which dominates current thinking on this issue.

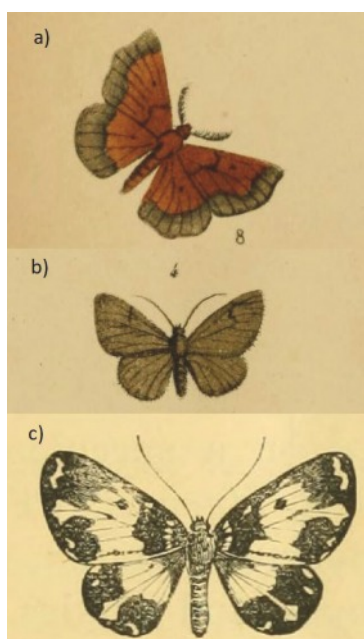


Figure 4.  
Some Lepidoptera varieties  
captured by Prest and figured in *The Entomologist*:

a) Dark Bordered Beauty *Epione vespertaria* ab. *fulva*, figured in (Anon., 1878a) (see p138).

b) White-spotted Pug *Eupithecia albipunctata* var. *angelicata*, figured in (Anon., 1878a) (see p140).

c) Variety of Argent and Sable *Rheumaptera hastata*, figured in (Carrington, 1881) (see p143).

Specimens are not illustrated to the same scale.

In January 1878 Prest received a letter inviting the YDFNS to contribute to a "Great National Entomological Exhibition", the first of its kind, to be held at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster (Anon., 1878b). The organizer was John T. Carrington, naturalist at the aquarium, former editor of *The Entomologist* and later president of the South London Entomological Society. The YNU delegated Prest and Porritt to represent Yorkshire and George Dennis and George Jackson from the YDFNS also went (Porritt, 1878b). It was attended by an astonishing 70,000 people between 9 and 23 March but received mixed reviews. Porritt in *The Naturalist* reported it favourably (Porritt, 1878b), as did *The Entomologist* (Farn & Weston, 1878), but the *Entomologist's Monthly Magazine* (Anon., 1878d) felt that it had fallen between two stools, too broad to be of use to experts and too over-the-heads of the public. Prest had exhibited several rarities, including his White-spotted Pug var. *angelicata*, Dark Bordered Beauty ab. *fulva* and Fortified Carpet mentioned above, as well as the *Ephestia* sheet web mentioned earlier, about which *The Entomologist* reported that "when twisted into a rope like form this web had supported a weight of 56 pounds". Dennis also contributed a gynandromorph Dark Bordered Beauty captured at Sandburn the previous year (Anon., 1878a) and now in the NHM London. The *Daily News* (London) on 12 March reported that the exhibition included "Mr W. Prest, of York (exhibits 391-419) the northern varieties of the British moth in a most complete manner"<sup>52</sup> whilst *The Standard* reported that "northern insects of infinite variety are shown by Mr Prest of York."<sup>53</sup>

On 5 August Prest acted as local secretary organizing the fifth YNU meeting of the year, at Bishop Wood. This was successful with good weather, 50-60 attendees and some 60 species of Lepidoptera recorded, including Silver-washed Fritillary (Denison Roebuck, 1878).

1879 marked Prest's involvement in the YNU grand exhibition at the Leeds Mechanics Institute, 10-16 January. At the opening *conversazione*, 400-500 people were present. Admission was one shilling with the Lepidoptera exhibition sharing the picture galleries with the bird collections. There were detailed reviews of the exhibition in *The Naturalist* (Anon., 1879a) and *Leeds Mercury*<sup>54</sup> but the *York Herald* gave the most details of the Prest collection: "An important feature of this part of the exhibition is the collection of British Lepidoptera belonging to Mr W. Prest, of York, consisting of 46 cases, which occupy in a double row, the whole of one side of the room. This collection includes about 2,000 varieties and between 12,000 and 15,000 specimens, many of which are exceedingly rare and valuable, and it is undoubtedly the finest collection in the north of England."<sup>55</sup> The exhibition however was a financial failure and lost money, which was attributed to bad weather and local economic depression.<sup>55</sup>

The 11 January YNU meeting at the Leeds exhibition marked the start of an ambitious project of the YNU Entomological Section, led by Prest and Porritt, to compile a list of all Yorkshire Lepidoptera with localities (Denison Roebuck, 1879a). For several years thereafter *The Naturalist* advertised the project on its back cover as one to be compiled by both Prest and Porritt, but this ceased after November 1881. As is well-known, the eventually-published lists came under Porritt's sole authorship, though it is obvious from the contents that Prest had a considerable hand in its compilation. It is possible that Prest 'dropped out' because of troubles at the YDFNS and illness, of which more below, but convention in those days was for manuscript writing to be undertaken by a single person.

The year 1879 was busy for Prest in other ways. He published his important list of macro-Lepidoptera from Askham Bog (Prest, 1879a), a benchmark study against which future records have been compared at this nationally important site (see Fitter & Smith, 1979). In this, he says he had been collecting Lepidoptera there for twenty years (i.e. since 1859). Of the butterflies he says that there are only 22 species at Askham and "none of them rare", but they contained Pearl-bordered, Small Pearl-bordered and Marsh Fritillaries, Green Hairstreak and Dingy Skipper; all now gone from the site, one gone from the county (Marsh Fritillary) and one now very rare (Pearl-bordered Fritillary). Green Hairstreak persists at Strensall but is now otherwise gone from the Vale of York. In this paper is the definitive statement that Dark Bordered Beauty moth did not occur there, despite the foodplant Creeping Willow being abundant, and despite moth specimens from Askham appearing in collections in the 1890s (Mayhew, 2018). It seems likely, therefore, that the 1890s specimens were the result of introductions, and John T. Carrington later claimed that he and Prest had attempted several such introductions unsuccessfully, although had named no specific sites (Anon., 1886). The list contains 325 species in all, and ended with the memorable words "I have visited most of the celebrated hunting grounds but never met with a place more prolific in insect life than Askham Bog, and for a really enjoyable collecting expedition, commend me to that locality".

This statement was prophetic because on 2 June 1879 Prest once again acted as local secretary for a YNU field meeting (the 3<sup>rd</sup> YNU meeting of that year) with Askham the main venue and YDFNS recruited as helpers. The day was well-attended by 60-70 YNU members. The post-field meetings were held in the Victoria Hall, Goodramgate, and although the botanists had a good time, the late spring meant that the entomologists were disappointed that day (Denison

Roebuck, 1879b). At the YNU excursion to Doncaster, 4 August, Prest and Porritt found a colony of the “very local” moth *Scoparia basistrigalis* in Edlington Wood. This was the first county record of which there remain only six (Denison Roebuck, 1879c). Prest also went on the 6 September YNU meeting to Riccall Common but collecting was disappointing (Denison Roebuck, 1879d). Riccall Common was destroyed by enclosure the very next year (Eagle Clarke, 1882)! On 17 September 1879 Prest was collecting at Sandburn again, this time with Robert Hind (described by Prest as his friend) and his son Austen, the latter finding an Alder Moth larva (Prest, 1879c). Clearly the rift over the split of the YES by then had healed fully, perhaps testament to Prest’s genial and likeable nature that seems to come across from how people wrote about him. During November, December, January and February Prest announced to the YDFNS and YNU that he would hold an open house every first and third Monday for people to visit his collection and make inquiries (Anon., 1879b).

At the 1880 YNU meeting in Malton on 17 May, Prest seconded a proposal for a “memorial” to Charles Darwin, signed by the president, congratulating him on the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Origin of Species (Denison Roebuck, 1880). This was presented in person to Darwin by a deputation from the YNU at his home on 3 November (Anon., 1880b) and was timely given that Darwin died some 17 months later. From this it seems that Prest held pro-Darwinian leanings, in marked contrast to some of his contemporaries such as former YES president Rev F.O. Morris, a staunch anti-Darwinist (Morris, 1875), and other YDFNS members such as William Hewett<sup>56</sup>. The excursion to Castle Howard in connection with the Malton meeting had produced only five species of Lepidoptera, one of which however was Pearl-bordered Fritillary (Denison Roebuck, 1880)! In June Prest found by lantern at Sandburn a Large Red-belted Clearwing, a rare moth in Yorkshire (Prest, 1880a). In a letter dated August 16 1880 to *The Entomologist* (Prest, 1880b) Prest declared the current season the best for the last 8-10 years. He detailed a long list of captures at Sandburn and Edlington Wood, including a Leopard Moth, which he could not remember occurring in the district before. The January 1881 issue of *The Entomologist* figured an unusual variety of Argent and Sable taken by Prest at Edlington Wood in June 1880 (Carrington, 1881) (see figure 4, p141). Autumn 1880 produced an influx of Camberwell Beauties and Prest reported a couple seen or captured in York (Prest, 1880c).

On 15 January 1881 Prest acted as local secretary for the YNU annual meeting, held in the Victoria Hall, Goodramgate, York, at which the YDFNS hosted a *conversazione* and *soiree* based around its collections, including that of Prest (Denison Roebuck, 1881). At this stage William, now 56, employed five men and his son; Mary Jane, 27, was still a “sales woman”; Laura, 25, no occupation; Charles Segar, son, 23, Engine Fitter; and William Thomas, 18, painter<sup>57</sup>. The family therefore had the painting business employing the two Williams, and Charles and Mary Jane bringing in additional income. It is interesting that all the grown-up children were still living at home (none had yet married). On 9 July 1881 Prest attended the YNU excursion at Thorne Moors and obtained Dotted Border Wave, then a new species to Yorkshire, and abundant Large Heath and Forester amongst many other moths (Wrigglesworth, 1882). On 7 August Prest found *Scoparia ancipitella* (then called *S. conspiciualis*) at Sandburn, another new county record (then newly described) and a moth that remains rare in Yorkshire and very local in the UK (Wrigglesworth, 1882). A letter to *The Entomologist* on 26 August by L. Sturge from York relates the unlikely capture of an Adonis Blue near Oban in Scotland, and that Prest had checked it for him (Sturge, 1881).

In September 1881 the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting returned to York, fifty years after the first meeting there, and both William Prests were listed as associates



attending<sup>58</sup>. In *The Entomologist*, Prest (1882a) reported (16 Oct 1881) that it had been quite hard that year to find several pug moths that had been common previously. In a separate article (Prest, 1882b) he said he had found several *S. ancipitella* in his collection previously overlooked.

The 1882 and 1883 editions of *The Naturalist* contained few new mentions of Prest with only the YDFNS meetings of September to December 1882 being reported, all with Prest contributions. In a note to *The Entomologist* on 26 June 1882 Prest declared that this was the worst collecting season of his life (Prest, 1882c). He put it down to a mild winter enabling natural enemies to deplete the resting stages of Lepidoptera. In July 1883, Prest contributed a short note to *The Entomologist* on how poor the 1883 season had also been, this time due to cold, and that he had sugared near Penrith without success (Prest, 1883c). Another note on 20 September somewhat undermined the former one by listing quite a nice series of captures from Sandburn in July and August, from having “worked hard” there (Prest, 1883d). On 12 September at the YDFNS meeting Prest exhibited the tortrix *Epinotia rubiginosana*, then new to Yorkshire, and remaining rare today (Prest, 1883b). In December 1883 Prest published a paper on a new variety of burnet moth which he named provisionally *Zygaena eboracae*, considering it a local form of Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet (Prest, 1883e). It was pale with a pale border. He had visited the Natural History Museum collections in London, the Doubleday collection and the Zeller collection and had found nothing similar. Some specimens had been exhibited by Kirby at the Entomological Society of London and the general opinion was that they were Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet (Anon. 1883-1884), and Porritt later wrote the opinion that the unusual colour was a developmental abnormality (Porritt, 1884b). It has subsequently been considered *Z. Ionicerae* ab. *eboracae* Prest (e.g. Seitz, 1913). 1883 also saw the publication of the first set of Porritt’s lists (Porritt, 1883), of course without Prest as co-author. Though Porritt was otherwise generous in indicating those who had contributed information, Prest was not singled out above others.

In October 1883 the minutes of the YDFNS<sup>47</sup> indicate that the society was in financial difficulty and certain facts indicate that incompetence (or possibly foul play?) was at work. The treasurer, Mr Farmer, tendered his resignation but this was not accepted “unless he explain certain items”<sup>47</sup>. At the November meeting George Dennis was appointed treasurer. In a letter received by the Society on 8 March 1884 from Samuel Walker of the ‘York Field Naturalists and Scientific Society’, a relatively new society being run from the northern side of the city, an eight-point plan of amalgamation of the two societies was put forward, with Point 6 being that no responsibility be taken for the YDFNS debts (which were £2 8s 2d). Point 5 was that the new Society would meet at new premises (i.e. not at Prest’s house). A YDFNS deputation (Dennis, Prest and Wilkinson) agreed to meet Walker at 11 Tower Street and agreed with all the proposals except Point 6, feeling that the debts could be covered by assets<sup>47</sup>. The amalgamation came to pass with the name of the amalgamated society eventually reverting to that of its older predecessor, a change that would have been of some comfort to Prest. However, the financial problems and the loss of ownership necessitated by the resulting merger must have been a cause of great strain and a heavy blow.

William Prest died at home aged 59 just a few days later on Monday 7 April 1884<sup>59</sup> of gout (a painful inflammation of joints caused by accumulation of uric acid crystals)<sup>60</sup>. He had apparently suffered from this complaint for a long time (Carrington, 1884) but this particular bout had only been a short one (Porritt 1884a). Risk factors for gout include lead poisoning, which affects kidney function, and Prest may have had high and long-term exposure to lead from paint through his decorating work. Flare-ups of gout can be caused by stress and it is possible



that the YDFNS issues were a contributing factor, though all this must remain speculative. The interment was at 2.30pm on 9 April at York Cemetery<sup>59</sup>. The grave is number 4208, adjacent to the Seagar grave (grave 4103) and paid for earlier by Jane. The two headstones are in exactly the same style and William's grave now contains himself, Phoebe Ann, Charles Seagar, and William Thomas. The adjacent grave contains Annie Prest along with Thomas Seagar (Phoebe's father), Jane Seagar (her mother) and James Spetch (Jane's father).

### **The aftermath, 1884 onwards**

Obituaries of Prest were published by Porritt in *The Naturalist* (Porritt, 1884a) and by John T. Carrington in *The Entomologist* (Carrington, 1884); publications and people with whom Prest had fruitful associations. Porritt's reminiscence seems to capture Prest well: "We have, when out collecting with him, often been struck with his pleasure on the capture of beautiful and perfect specimens of comparatively common species." Briefer death notices appeared in *Leopoldina* (Anon., 1884a) and *Zoologischer Anzeiger* (in German) (Anon., 1884b), implying some influence abroad.

The YDFNS met for its April monthly meeting on the day of Prest's interment but, owing to the death, no specimens were exhibited and the Society sent a note of condolence to Mrs Prest and family<sup>47</sup>. The YDFNS continued to be active until the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, disbanding in 2002. From 1894, annual reports were kept of members' records by sectional recorders in ledger books gifted by George Dennis, and these and other society records and papers are now in the Borthwick Institute in York where they form a valuable natural and social historical legacy. Under Prest's initial influence, the YNU and its Entomological Section are still going strong and Prest's records from the York district form an important baseline against which more recent records of Yorkshire's Lepidoptera fauna can be compared.

Prest's insect collection was auctioned in London by J.C. Stevens of Covent Garden on 15 July 1884<sup>61</sup>, presumably to provide funds for the dependents in the family. Tragically, the collection was split into 80 lots, hence has been fragmented and it would now be much work to trace the surviving specimens. One Dark Bordered Beauty specimen mentioned above is in the Natural History Museum, London; others of the same species are in the Birmingham Museums Trust collection having first ended up in the South collection. The catalogue of sale still exists and provides some details of the contents<sup>61</sup>. There were 7,560 specimens mentioned, hence only about half the number estimated from the Leeds exhibition review (which may not have been accurate). It had been housed in a mahogany cabinet with 20 drawers, and another with 34 drawers, sold as separate lots. There were several rare Hawk-moths including Spurge, Bedstraw, Striped and Death's-head. There were six specimens of "*Zygaena eboracae*", sold in three lots of two specimens each, and nine Large Thorns, sold in three lots of three. There were 19 Dark Bordered Beauty specimens, though no varieties were mentioned. Many of the lots however contained fine varieties. A "fine series" of Magpie varieties numbered 34 specimens and another of Common and Dark Marbled Carpet numbered 126. That of Garden Tiger numbered 25 specimens. There was a single Clifton Nonpareil. The last lot contained two Camberwell Beauties, two Purple Emperors, two Large Blues, a Mazarine Blue and a Purple-edged Copper!

The Prest family fragmented following the death of William. Phoebe first lived on her inheritance with Laura in Minster Yard<sup>62</sup>, but when Laura married in 1900<sup>63</sup> Phoebe moved to live with Mary Jane in Coney Street<sup>64</sup>, where she remained until dying of "senile decay" in 1911<sup>65</sup>, aged 81. Mary Jane set up in business as a linen draper at 46 Coney Street<sup>66</sup>. She raised her brother William's son (William Charles Seagar) until 1914 when he joined the armed forces at the

start of the Great War<sup>67</sup>. Mary Jane never married but her business was apparently successful and she left a will of over £10,000<sup>68</sup> when she died in 1920<sup>69</sup>. Laura initially lived with Phoebe in Minster Yard<sup>62</sup>, working as a dressmaker, but in 1900 married John Shannon<sup>63</sup>, a widowed schoolmaster, and then lived in Castlegate with his children<sup>70</sup>, dying in 1906<sup>71</sup>.

Charles Seagar married Annie Brown (b. c.1870 in York) in Wandsworth in 1898<sup>72</sup> and they lived in West Ham, London, where they had three children, Norah, Phyllis, who contracted polio aged 2, and Charles<sup>73</sup>, though Charles senior's job as a marine engineer meant he was seldom at home. They moved back to York when Charles retired, having contracted Locomotor Ataxia (a nervous affliction resulting from syphilis) aged 50<sup>73</sup>. He eventually died of this in 1917, aged 59<sup>74</sup>, leaving Annie £151 in his estate<sup>75</sup>.

William Thomas was apparently the black sheep of the family. After his father's death he travelled annually to New York on business for several years<sup>76</sup>, where on one occasion he must have returned with a son, William Charles Seagar, who was subsequently raised by Mary Jane<sup>64</sup>! He appears to have held several job titles, including commercial traveller<sup>76</sup>, liver merchant<sup>68</sup> and painter<sup>77</sup>. He remained single and lodged in Hull<sup>77</sup>, dying of gangrene in 1921, aged 59<sup>78</sup>. I have often wondered if subsequent male Prest descendants got nervous as they approached the age of 59!

William Charles Seagar Prest became a clerk in Beckett's Bank in York<sup>67</sup>. At the outbreak of the Great War he joined the cavalry reserve, but was subsequently granted a commission in the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment. In January 1916 he was sent to the western front, as battalion bombing officer, and took part in the Battle of the Somme, being wounded on 7 July. He was evacuated home to recover but on returning to the trenches was shot dead by a sniper on 17 August<sup>67</sup>. He is buried at Authuille military cemetery and his grave inscribed "He giveth his beloved sleep"<sup>79</sup>. He is memorialized in St Martin Le Grand church on Coney Street, near to where he was raised by Mary Jane.

### **The remaining Prest mysteries**

It must be rare when a biographer discovers everything he or she hoped to. My unsolved wish-list for this biography included: What happened to William's parents and siblings? Where did he go to school? How did he come to take up entomology? How did he meet the Seagars? What did he look like? Why did the YES fold? When did he first fall ill with gout and what was the cause? What made him drop out of Porritt's lists (if that is what happened)? What happened to his paintings and to the papers that he presented but did not publish? What were the precise circumstances of the YDFNS financial crisis and merger? Where are his entomological specimens now? And what on Earth did William Thomas get up to in New York? These and other mysteries I leave for future researchers to speculate on or solve.

### **Acknowledgments**

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